THE GANGSTER
BY G. K. CHESTERTON

I ATTEMPTED last week to describe something which has not, I think, been adequately noticed about the man who is now the mask if not the mind of Prussianism. I called him a Crank; and yet the word may suggest something more fantastic and even fascinating than anything I mean. I mean the man of inferior culture who is superior about his culture. He is not a wild prophet or a popular poet, or any elemental sort of person, who might consistently defy or despise culture. He is the man who quotes texts, but not the original texts; who relies on text-books, but they are the old text-books; who talks about science, but it might be any sort of science; even Christian Science. But to this character there must be added another, to complete the portrait. And I do not mean it as a mere term of abuse, if I say that such a man must have the making, not only of a crank but of a criminal. Perhaps the modern word that best expresses it is a Gangster. But the title is not only conditioned, but heavily limited by the other title. I completely understand what is meant, for instance, by calling Mussolini a Gangster. Leaving on one side, for the moment, the debate about his defensible or indefensible actions, the Italian Dictator may be a Gangster, but he is not a Crank. Oddly enough, it may be thought, he is not what I meant by talking of a man being lower middle class. As a matter of mere labels, he is lower class. He is the son of a poor blacksmith, and altogether a man of the people. But he is a man of the Italian people; and anybody who has ever seen the Italian people will know the difference. The Italian poor have a natural distinction and dignity of personal behaviour, and even personal appearance; which is not German. Also, they inherit a great history, which is historical as well as great. There was much that can be called brutal or bloody about pagan Rome, as about most pagan things; but the greatness of Rome was not a myth. There was also any amount that was brutal and bloody about primitive pagan Germany; but its greatness is entirely a myth. The huge historic importance of Julius Caesar is a European fact. The huge historic importance of Arminius is a German fairytale. Therefore we find that Mussolini goes back to the emblem of the Fasces, which the whole world had really heard of; and Hitler goes back to the Swastika, which no normal person had ever heard of; or certainly not as a symbol of either European or German domination. In short, Mussolini was not probably at the beginning what we call a man of culture; but he was a man inheriting a common sense which comes of a common culture. He was born in the daylight; and the crank is always groping in the dark.

But when we turn to the other aspect, which has been here for convenience called that of the Gangster, we come upon another psychological stratum, which has a character of its own in connection with modern Germany. A vast amount of very wicked rubbish has been uttered under the title of Criminology; largely consisting of picking out a number of very poor people with peculiar skulls or ears or noses, and telling them that science has condemned them to be criminals. But there is one generalisation that has been made about the principal professional criminals, in which there is probably some truth. And that is the statement that most really successful thieves and murderers are horribly conceited. Their egoism is often much more repulsive than their crimes. And egoism is the most elusive, the most pervasive, and, saving the grace of God, the most incurable of crimes. When a man has had the misfortune to look into the mirror before he looked out of the window, he presents a spiritual problem of the most desperate kind. And that is the real problem of the barbarians on the northern border of Christendom; not necessarily of each of them individually, or of any of them when they are under better influences; but their besetting sin in the sense that it is the sin that most readily and successfully besets them. And it besets them just now to the mortal peril of all mankind; but especially of themselves.

Pride is a weakness; that is the great moral fact which the Prussianised German finds it almost impossible to understand. And yet, though it is quite unfamiliar to many other modern men besides Germans, it is in itself a very plain and practical truism. Pride is a weakness because it is a pleasure; which does not mean that all pleasures are wrong, but that there must be something wrong about regarding a mere pleasure as quite superhumanly and heroically right. We all like to think well of ourselves; and within reason it is a perfectly normal and natural enjoyment, like smoking or drinking beer. But even German philosophers would hardly maintain that it is a sign of heroic superiority to smoke or drink beer; and yet German philosophers have encouraged the notion that it is a sign of heroic superiority to think well of themselves. But if you are enquiring exactly and strictly about who is a strong man, there can only be one possible answer: the strong man is he who can really face the fact that he is weak. Now the Nordic Man, even when he is born as far south as Austria, will never admit that he is weak; he will not consent to enjoy his own pride as vanity. He is utterly and unbearably serious about his own superiority; and that has a direct connection with his long career as a criminal.

Many gangsters and great criminals have been jailed or hanged because of their vanity. The reason is that they are not single-minded; but have a double mind and motive; partly wishing to conceal their crime and partly wishing to boast of it. This attempt to do two opposite things at once can be clearly seen in several Prussian blunders. It has been said that Von Kluck lost the Battle of the Marne by trying to combine the showy act of capturing Paris with the military act of outflanking the French line. And the most unnatural and blood-curdling quality about many of the Nazi
actions is the attempt to bring of brutality, in the very
set of assuring the world of good intentions. As diplo-
matists they would disavow brutality; but as moralists
they are not really ashamed of it. So Hitler roars
through the loudspeaker, “Give me your children or
I will come and take them,” because while he has the
theoretical aim of being a popular educationist, he has
also a sort of thrill in being regarded as the Giant
Blunderbore. The name out of the old fairytale is
appropriate enough; for the man who does that
certainly blunders and is undoubtedly a bore.

Odds and Ends
By J. Desmond Gleichon

A SPANNER INTO THE WORKS.

In the early days of motors the law insisted that
a gentleman with a red flag should go before
petrol-propelled vehicles, giving warning of what
was coming and bidding pedestrians prepare for the
worst. To be fair, it was not always true that the
motor was coming up behind the colour-sergeant, for
the works frequently broke down and for a space even
the wicked were at rest. Yielding, mistakenly, to
pressure of salesmen and public alike, it was decided
to get rid of the picturesque flag-waver and motorists
thereafter were at liberty to run him down or shoo
him off the highway. There is however a very good
case nowadays for bringing him back, flag and all.
In these days of depression a great impetus would be
given to employment if every motorist were compelled
to employ a herald to walk before and assure folk
that he was coming. The cotton industry would derive
great benefit from the making of the few millions of
flags that the “danger” men would require. It is
possible that the Fascists would object to the sudden
appearance of so many red flags; but then they object
to a great many things. Incidentally the reappearance
of the flag-flutterer would relieve the monotony of
having about a quarter of a million persons maimed
or destroyed each year by motorists on the highways.
A correspondent in these pages, very properly appalled
at the growing casualty list, makes the suggestion
that a speed limit of 25 miles an hour should be
imposed for a trial period to see how many victims
could be saved during the time of grace. As a matter
of fact, though in the right direction, I doubt if the
suggestion goes far enough. It is possible that some
people do not realise the temptation to speed when the
controls and the wheel are in the motorist’s hands.
When you have a potential 60 m.p.h. under your
thumb it is pretty hard to make it a mere 25. Unless
you are going at top speed you do not feel that you
are getting the best out of your car, i.e., out of your
bargain. As a matter of fact the speed business is
entirely unnecessary. People do not need to career
along at a mile a minute. It all merely comes from the
current delusion that going fast is the same thing as
getting there. Getting wheels to go faster and
gerater is believed to be an end in itself. Actually it
is more likely to be the end of somebody else. But
the point is that there is no necessity for great speed.
Minutes are as precious to leisure as they are to haste.
To save a few of them at the risk of another’s life is
not worth doing. Nevertheless you will never succeed
in persuading a motorist that he is not in a hurry.
He has it firmly fixed in his head that two minutes
taken over a mile is one minute wasted. What must
be done, therefore, is to reduce the possible speed of
his engine to the 25 mile maximum of the correspond-
dent or to the mere 12 miles an hour of my own
choice. Motors must be made that are incapable of
exceeding that speed; about four times the pace of a
moderate walker, the steady pace of a good horse.
Twelve miles an hour is sufficient to feel that you are
moving and insufficient to make your motor into a
menace. People can do just as much business and
take a great deal more pleasure at 12 miles than at 60.
When they are really in a hurry they can call upon
the greater comfort of the trains. Moreover the
motorist would probably find that he could get just
as much thrill from a car which could only do 12
miles when he put it at its fullest, as from the highly-
powered auto at his command. In each case he would
be just trying to get the best out of his machine. If
the best were a pleasant twelve miles an hour he could
still put his energy into it without being a danger to
the community. He could still be the violent road-
hog of his dreams, thundering through the countryside
at 12 miles an hour. He could still be eternally in a
hurry, if his hurry is fixed by his own engine at 12
miles. Indeed it is the engine makers who are really
the enemies of the people for putting such powerful
forces in his incapable hands. It is the manufacturers
then who must be compelled by law to produce no
engine with a greater speed than 12 miles per hour
and—can’t you see it being done?

THE CHARM OF SURREY.

“The Oval always to me epitomises the spirit of
Cricket, the keenest members, the keenest crowd, and
the greatest consideration for all who attend. What
more desirable locality and what more ideal conditions
could one desire?” Many will envy Mr. Bosanquet in
this neat choice of words which so perfectly describe
the finest of all cricketing situations. What more
desirable locality indeed! It is common knowledge
that the authorities examined the broad county of
Surrey with the utmost care before deciding that their
wickets should be pitched on that well-known beauty
spot, the village green picturesquely termed the Oval.
A county so rich in villages and in greens, it was a
matter of some niceness to decide which really was
the perfect one amongst them all. Yet no one can
doubt that the selection was entirely just. Placed so
neatly in the centre of the peaceful village of Ken-
nington, the Oval seems to slumber under its full
circle of trees. To the right the ancient village church
rises, a homely guardian, a reminder that though the
green may be given up to manly exercise on Saturday
afternoon, Sunday has duties of its own. On the
opposite side and standing by itself is the hospitable
tavern known to sportsmen throughout the world as
the “Pad and Glove.” A few wooden benches here
and there show that the oldest inhabitants do not
despise the games of the young, while a few cows,
beside the solemnly pondering, add a friendly touch to
the serene tranquil picture. As Mr. B. truly remarks, what more
tranquil picture? So unlike that
desirable locality could one desire? So unlike that
desirable locality could one desire?